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The Rhetoric of Demonic Repetition:

The Two Deaths of Osama Bin Laden and Other Stories

Abstract

A number of writers have recently challenged the notion of the demonic as mere superstition, and arguing for a need to understand the demonic in terms of the often-observed ways in which it operates in relation to contemporary thought and critique. Building on this, this paper offers an analysis of the demonic as a rhetorical concept. Moving beyond the notion of the demonic as simply a trope at the disposal of a speaker or writer, the paper explores how the expression of the demonic performs a more foundational, repetitive, and indeed, deceptively banal role in shaping the discourses it inhabits. This precedes and frames the ethico-political discourses on evil commonly associated with demonology today.

1 Rethinking the Demonic

Responding to Gershom Scholem's claim that her phrase the 'banality of evil' had become a mere slogan, losing any effective contribution to moral or political debate, Hannah Arendt wrote:

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical," that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. [...] It is "thought-defying," as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its "banality." (Arendt 2017: 209)

This is, of course, a reiteration of Arendt's famous claims on the agency of evil. One can perform evil deeds, she argues, without being intrinsically evil; this is because contemporary evil can exist in the most ordinary and banal of activities. As such, she alludes to the demonic here only as a redundant trope – an aesthetic and mythical manifestation of the 'depths' of evil which does not, she argues, exist in contemporary culture. But if the demonic is redundant to the question of evil, there is a sense in which it is rendered banal as well, in the sense that any invocation of 'radical evil' itself becomes tired, lifeless and cartoonish. The problem is that this banality does not emerge within the acts of agents, as Arendt focuses on. Rather, the concept of the demonic has always been one to exhibit a fundamental complexity regarding the relationship between the appearance of evil, and the medium through which it emerges. Perhaps, then, the banality of the demonic requires separate attention from the banality of evil.

Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that as the forms of medial communication grow and intensify throughout 21st century, a number of writers have engaged with the question of what 'function' the demonic has to play in the 21st century (Cruz 2001: 428). While working

across a range of disciplines, these writings all challenge the idea of the demonic as mere superstition or a symbol of evil. Eduardo Cruz, for example, returns to Paul Tillich's theological argument that the demonic is a force of destructive creativity, existing dialectically between the 'ground' and the 'abyss' (2001: 428). Eugene Thacker (2011, 2015a, 2015b) has considered the demonic in ontological terms: suggesting that, in place of a philosophy of horror, we consider the 'horror of philosophy' that links the themes of the demonology with investigations into object-oriented ontology. Simona Forti's *The New Demons* (2015) argues for a 'post-Dostoevsky' model of demonology, in the face of the delegitimising of the assumptions that promote 'the good' in contemporary culture. Ewan Fernie has applied a literary focus to the demonic as 'the paradox of life that is opposed to life.' (2013: 22). Adam Kotsko's *Neoliberalism's Demons* (2018) re-inserts the devil as a constitutive form within the political theology of neoliberalism. Of course, these cross-disciplinary reappraisals are not gathered together under any pretence of unified view or intent. However, in spite of their seemingly arbitrary collection, these writings nevertheless all press two distinct themes. First, they share an understanding that within the complexities of 21st century Western culture, simplistic representations of the demonic must be interrogated and critiqued; a task that necessarily invokes the *performance* of demonic tropes and figures within our discourses, rather than the agential and moral use of such tropes which Arendt invokes. Second, they present the demonic, not as an external or radical 'other' to their respective disciplines, but rather as a destabilising force at the *centre* of theology, ontology, and morality. Taken together, these themes suggest that the topic of the demonic challenges the modes of traditional etic analysis. After all, establishing the basis of a critical distance between the 'knowing' subject and the 'known' object is problematic, when that object is characterised by deception and mutation of the very categories the subject uses to 'know'.¹ Consequently, the style and delivery of their critiques often respond to the demands

of the concept itself.² In this sense, the fact that contemporary concerns for the demonic and its relation to evil emerge in somewhat arbitrary ways is constitutive of its rhetoric.

In this paper, I continue these themes by focussing on the rhetorical performance of demonic repetition. In keeping with the broad directions sketched above, my interest is less with how the demonic is *used* as a trope (for example, the framing of particular individuals or groups demonically in order to incite fear or hatred). Instead, I am interested in how the characteristics of this repetition interlink with the media which carries its emergence, and the resulting ‘rhetorical transformation’ which ‘discourse experiences’ (Gries 2016, p.158), outside of any individual agency or single speaking subject (Hanchey 2018). As such, in order to understand the contemporary demonic rhetorically, we need to look beyond mere trope, allegory or ornament at the disposal of a speaker. Instead, the expression of the demonic performs a more foundational – indeed, deceptively *banal* – role in shaping the discourses it inhabits, encouraging forms of nihilistic impasse at the expense of creative approaches to moral and political events. In doing so, the demonic expresses a relationship between the efficacy, trust and suspicion that the meaning of an event carries; a relationship characterised by what Boris Groys (2012) terms ‘sub-medial suspicion.’ This relationship is embedded within the fleeting, theatrical *performances* by which the demonic appears in the rhetorical sense: performances which involve the interlinking of creativity, destruction, repetition and resemblance. This rhetorical aspect, I suggest, precedes and frames the ethico-political discourses on evil commonly associated with demonology today.

Recognising both the performative nature of the demonic, and the wariness of its effects on knowledge that scholarship has raised, I want to explore this rhetoric through three demonic ‘scenes’, which serve as fleeting illustrations of three significant aspects of demonic repetition for rhetoric: its misconception as a sign of difference; its paradoxical creation of sincerity; and its subsequent effect on the power of critique. In referencing these scenes –

Lanz's argument linking the demonic to the triteness of gossip; the reporting of the death of Osama Bin Laden; and the *Black Mirror* episode 'White Bear' – my purpose is not to provide in-depth analysis of each performance, but to use them as waypoints for drawing together an involution of wider concepts supporting their *persuasiveness*; a persuasiveness which depends in part on the pace of their appearance and disappearance. While maintaining this pace, I will attempt to demonstrate how, within these small and erstwhile insignificant moments, the rhetoric of demonic repetition disrupts its own conventional framing as a form of radical evil.

2 Demonic Gossip

In a little-known paper written for the *International Journal of Ethics* in 1936, Henry Lanz begins with the striking claim: his paper was 'an attempt to prove the existence of the Devil.' (1936, p.492) He continues:

The mingled absurdity and bigotry of such an undertaking in the twentieth century, in the very flush of the age of scientific enlightenment, will perhaps seem less striking if one considers the vagueness that prevails in our views with regard to the gentleman whose existence I desire to demonstrate. For just who is, what is, the Devil? (Lanz 1936, p.492)

Rather than dismiss the Devil as a collective noun for a whole range of past superstitions, Lanz instead identifies its 'vagueness' as a constitutive aspect of its activity, which places it firmly in the modern age. Thus, to prove the existence of the Devil, Lanz suggests we recognise that the Devil is a 'surface phenomenon'; 'one-sided, only skin deep, with no real background – aimless evil'. But – and here is the clever twist – 'aimless and idle

talk is gossip.’ (Lanz 1936, p.492) Hence, the point of his paper, entitled ‘The Metaphysics of Gossip’, is to argue that the phenomenon of idle chatter should be seen as an ethical affair: not only because it often involves pointing out the rights and wrongs of other’s actions, but more importantly because the language of gossip refuses to be drawn into narrative or teleology – it is carried by slowly mutating repetition – and thus remains, in Lanz’s words, a ‘malady’ of our age (p.496).

If Lanz’s long-forgotten argument seems somewhat tenuous, it also provides a starting point for this inquiry for two reasons. The first reason is that, while insouciant in its approach, it nevertheless posits an important relationship between demonic repetition and the banality of representation, which anticipates a number of questions around the how the rhetoric of the demonic embeds itself within contemporary media. The second reason is the way in which Lanz’s attempt to remove the rhetorical dimension of gossip and replace it with the ethical *fails*, as it is this failure which highlights the specific problems posed by the rhetorical aspects of the demonic.

Lanz’s alignment of the demonic with gossip recasts the traditional identifies a relationship between the demonic and the apparent banality of the ‘surface phenomena’ of modern culture. This relationship was articulated some 40 years later by Anton Zijderveld (1979), who’s sociological study draws heavily on Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura in order to link a particular types of repetition in social interaction – banal idiom, and the cliché – to secular society’s loss of a fixed sense of authenticity or legitimacy which religion once provided. Modern society, according to Zijderveld’s blunt meta-narrative, becomes clichégenic: in the absence of religious ritual, icon or cosmological destiny, we have changeable, malleable and ultimately facile points that adapt perfectly to the consumerist demand of capitalism. Meaning is reduced to function; in this sense, Nietzsche’s seismic claim that *God is dead, and we have killed him* is a foundation of modernity not because of

its literal deicide, but rather because, as a quotable tagline, it circulates and disseminates more readily around all kinds of discourses. Such an association between cliché and tyranny has, of course, been (ironically) pressed to the point of over-familiarity; expressed across an entire spectrum of ideas and ideologies, from Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay on 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', to Jonah Goldberg's book-length assault on liberalism in 2011, and all in between.

This collapsing of the motifs of evil into repetitive banality is intrinsically linked to changes to the conditions by which they have traditionally been persuasive. The Western demonic traditionally emerges in the victorious wake of a divinity, a god-king, a Cartesian rationalist, a romantic hero, and so on. Zijderfeld's 'clichégenic society', however, renders this ultimate good as no longer restricted to the triumph of a singular or absolute reason, or innocence, or 'hypermoralization' (Forti 2015, p.178). Instead, the appearance of such an ultimate good is predicated on its persuasive use of repetition. Analysing figurative language in Western culture, Sarah Spence argues that while the stylistic element of anaphora was once used by rhetoricians as a point of emphasis, it has now 'migrated from superficial ornamentation to deep structural principle. [...] It provides a glimpse of what differentiates our era from all others' (2007, p.19). The rhetorical principle of repetition is, Spence argues, the 'embedded trope' of the late modern age: rolling news, hashtags and re-tweets compress, carry and shape the binding truths of our time *by virtue of* their repetition, not in spite of it. But rather than destroy the aura of sincere or authentic experience, as Benjamin described, such repetitions create and maintain authenticity, in ways that are both negative and positive, destructive and creative. Spence points, as an example, to the 9/11 Commission Report, which documents how it was only the crashing of the second plane that authenticated the first; it was only the repetition of the unthinkable that confirmed the singularity of the event itself. In this way, 'the second event has come to validate and identify the first, not the other

way around; without the second the first is often misconstrued.’ (p.33) Far from the destruction of ‘the event’ that Zijderveld prophesised, the singularity of an ‘event’ is never quite enough when it is necessarily predicated on anaphora. The ultimate good which supersedes the demonic instead depends, for its claim to be ‘ultimate’, on enthymemes of repetition and amplification.

Lanz’s paper thus asks an important question as to how decisive moral tropes such as ‘evil’ or ‘the Devil’ can be carried and shaped by the repetitive power of gossip. This question prefigures what we see in the 21st century when, for example, the news of Osama Bin Laden’s death was broken over Twitter, announced simultaneously by a White House security expert *and* a former World Wrestling Entertainment star turned film actor.³ Repeated images are both formative and effective in their representation of evil. We need only consider the rolling news coverage of the terrorist attacks in Paris on the 13th November 2015, which repeatedly showed the same, otherwise harmless clip of a van turning into a closed street: here, repetition both carries the event necessarily (‘breaking news’ is premised on a recurrent headline) and affectively (the repetition of the scene itself, which was perfectly mundane, only heightened the suspense around what was not being shown, or allowed to be shown).

But the second point of interest about Lanz’s paper is precisely why his argument fails. This failure is, indeed, one which dogs many discussions on demonology: that is, while his conceptual starting point is the Devil, such signs, symbols and figures of individual demons are not identical to the dialectical performance of the *demonic* as a concept. In *The Interpretation of History* (coincidentally, published in the same year as Lanz’s paper) Paul Tillich argues that if the demonic ‘has not yet become an empty slogan, its basic meaning must always be retained: the unity of form-creating and form-destroying strength.’ (1936, p.81) This unity distinguishes the demonic from the Satanic, the latter being a mere ‘destructive principle, inimical to meaning’, which ‘has no actual existence, unlike the

demonic'; and while this destructive negation is at work in the demonic, it is situated 'in connection with the positive, creative meaningful principle' (p.81) rooted in the form of the demonic. To take a form is a creative act; and this simple distinction between form-creation and form-destruction comprises the basis of the demonic as a creative power. But Tillich also notes how the creative act of the demonic is often passed over (in what he terms 'religious' ages), or over-emphasised (in 'secular' ages).⁴

In this way, Lanz's identification of a *sign* – the Devil – immediately diverts his attention from the question of the *surface itself*; and more specifically, the medial form which carries that surface, and how such surfaces interact and interconnect to create the appearance of meaning. Instead, a focus on the demon (in the singular) leads Lanz down what remains a familiar route: an identification of the demon as Other, and subsequently an analysis focusing on *difference*. Consider, for example, how works as diverse in content and aim as Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), Rogin's *Ronald Reagan: The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (1988), or Owen Jones' *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (2012), all nevertheless deploy the figure of the demon in a similar commonplace position: representing an Other which is threatening but ultimately servile, even ridiculous; the pantomime 'devil' character, who audiences take pleasure in booing from the stage. Clearly, this Othering is a core part of Western demonology. But, as a *koinos topos*, the emphasis of this figure on difference (chronological, topological or cultural) fundamentally diverges from Lanz's initial conception of gossip: that is, the phenomena of circulated same-ness and medial repetition. This becomes a problem because of its subsequent effect on critique; in particular, a secondary 'othering' which often accompanies the demon-as-other commonplace. The act of exposing the dichotomies of 'good' and 'evil' contained within the sign of the demon seems to necessarily invoke its own dichotomies of rationality and irrationality; between intellectual critique and the passive consumption of

modern demons. Prefiguring our next demonic scene, consider as an example Douglas Kellner's comments on the aftermath of 9/11:

The discourse of good and evil can be appropriated by disparate and opposing groups and generates a highly dichotomous opposition, undermining democratic communication and consensus and provoking violent militaristic responses. It is assumed by both sides that "we" are the good, and the "Other" is wicked, an assertion that Bush made in his incessant assurance that the "evil-doers" of the "evil deeds" will be punished, and that the "evil one" will be brought to justice, implicitly equating bin Laden with Satan himself. (Kellner 2004, p.47)

Here, Kellner critiques the reduction of post-9/11 discourse to simplistic dichotomies of 'us' and 'them', using these to highlight how the resurgence of crusading terminology and Just War re-invokes the Oriental demons of old. But at the same time, the force of his criticism leads to another reduction in the name of criticism itself: that is, one dichotomy (the creation of a good 'we' versus evil 'Other') is replaced with another (the active critic of this dichotomy, and its passive consumer). This rhetorical move is also seen in Lanz's proof of the devil, whereby he concludes that 'good' and 'evil' are appearances, not ultimate realities; and as appearances it is 'the artist' who can magnify the slipping of one into the other once they are embedded within idle chatter. For when gossip 'becomes artistic, far from degrading art to the level of mere chatter, it raises it to Olympic heights.' (1936, p.499) In other words: in the hands of the expert (the artist, the critic, etc.), good things may come. But the nature of these good things – that is, what is actually 'good' about them – already seems to go beyond the initial sense of good as a 'mere appearance'. There is a complex repetition at work which underlies this re-introduction of the 'good'; a repetition obscured by the focus on the *production* of demonic signs.

In this sense, perhaps the problem with the use of ‘the devil’ as a rhetorical motif is the excessive amount of *clarity* which this figure lends to what is, in reality, a muddily polysemic field, saturated with multiple visual and cultural references. As Forti rightly argues, we are no longer in what she terms ‘the Dostoevsky paradigm’ regarding the problem of evil: ‘*wicked demons* on the one side and *absolute victims* on the other,’ based around the ‘desire for and will to death’ (2015, p.6). Instead, Forti argues that such a paradigm of absolutes must be replaced by an understanding of ‘mediocre demons’ (p.9) that, far from being ‘ultimate’ are far more replicable and, as such, banal. In this way, Lanz is entirely correct to situate the demonic within the circulation of gossip. However, he also maintains an attempt to reduce the demonic to a motif of difference – ‘irrationality’, ‘other’, etc. – and thus frames gossip as straightforwardly antithetical to proper thinking (when outside of the hands of experts, at least). But the simplification of the demonic to one, destructive meaning overlooks the creative role of simulation and repetition that gives the demonic its specific, and persistent, effect, across its cultural history. Such a creativity is not reducible to the production and exchange of signs, but is rather embedded within the *preservation* and *circulation* of signs: that is, to borrow Forti’s terms, the mediocrity of communication.

3 Death and Sincerity

This mediocrity is perhaps exemplified with the death of Osama Bin Laden. The figure of Bin Laden in Western media shows how, despite scientific enlightenment and multiple secularisation theses, demons very much occupy the 21st century Western imaginary. As a devil, Bin Laden calls forth apparitions of the oriental/occidental divide; narratives of past crusades raised and re-raised from the dead of the past, metamorphoses from freedom fighter to terrorist, and images of the classical Termagant figure in curious juxtaposition with

emerging medial technologies. Both aesthetically and rhetorically, Bin Laden was an exemplar devil, and as such is immersed in unwieldy relations of myth and narrative surrounding the figuring of difference.

However, I want to pick up on a very small part of this narrative: not the fact that Bin Laden was killed, but that he was killed (at least) twice. The two deaths emerged from two official reports of the event; on the 2nd May 2011, the White House counter-terrorism advisor John Brennan gave a relatively detailed, and immediate, account of the death; the next day, White House press secretary Jay Carney presented a different narrative. In the first, Bin Laden's wife had been killed whilst being used as a human shield by the armed terrorist; and the Navy SEALs were instructed to take him alive if possible. In the second, the wife was only injured, having rushed at the SEALs, and it was not clear – and highly unlikely – that Bin Laden was himself armed.

The first, and perhaps most obvious reading of this, is that one death simply corrected the other. The initial report was inaccurate, so the second report corrected, explained or admitted ambiguities (certainly enough for some to question whether President Obama's claim that 'justice has been done' was wholly legally justified). And if we focus on the truth of the matter, or the clarification of facts, or the nature of justice – if we treat this as an epistemological or moral issue – then we remain in the domain of difference. There is no repetition, as such; just the bringing to light of all the known facts.

A second possible reading is that this double announcement simply re-asserts the conventional wisdom that the demonic only has meaning at all in terms of its ultimate overcoming by the powers of the divine; but with the added caveat that, since the death of God, the conspiracy theory is the only metaphysical certainty we have. The absence of a body would always fuel such a reading: but conspiratorial readings still insist on a linear narrative

unity, whereby a threat is presented and overcome; the demonic scene becomes a signification of demons. In Tillich's terms, this still emphasises the destructive aspect of the demonic at the expense of the creative.

But the real interest of the absent corpse was the deliberate removal of a sign or symbol of the death, meaning that the death itself directly opened a question of what Boris Groys (2012) terms 'sub-medial suspicion'. Epistemology and morality concern the exchange and relation of signs on the medial surface; but, Groys notes, signs necessarily block the medial carrier, which also sustains them.⁵ Submedial space thus remains a 'dark space of suspicion, speculations and apprehensions – but also that of sudden epiphanies and cogent insights.' (2012, p.13) The submedial subject is not one of knowledge, but of fear and suspicion. The ontology of media, then, is not about the correspondence of signs to truth, but medial *sincerity*: that is, how much we *trust* in the carrier of signs. While suspicion, in this sense, 'is generally considered a threat to all traditional values' (p.173), it is for Groys 'not a subjective attitude of the observer that can be changed by force or will; rather, it is constitutive of the very act of observation as such. We are unable to observe without becoming suspicious.' (p.174) As such, the more we believe that we have uncovered the medium of a message, the sincerer it seems. This is only ever fleeting; for, just as flipping over of a painting reveals the canvas behind, once the sub-medial becomes visible it becomes a sign, and consequently is supported by its own, hidden, sub-medial space. We cannot see the two at once: we are thus, Groys suggests, 'always already involved in the economy of suspicion, which is, so to say, the medium of all media.' (p.175)

In this sense, there is something within the repetition of Bin Laden's deaths which embeds the scene within the broader history of the demonic as a cultural form. This link is the sense in which the sincerity of the event *itself* was created in this act of repetition. With all else that surrounded the figure of Bin Laden – whose effective power of 'terrorism' went well

beyond bounded *acts* of terror, and was maintained through the *aesthetic* means of emergence within networked media (both of his own production, and of those who fought him) – for his death to be ‘authentic’, there *had* to be some kind of a cover-up, some kind of error, some form of unreliable report. One act could not be enough: for with the perpetual possibility of alternative accounts and iterations – images, documents, feeds, etc. – medial *sincerity* is only really achieved once a report has been first rendered suspect, and then repeated. The sincerity of the single event is premised on the metamorphosis of its own repetition; a repetition which assures both that the demon has been eliminated, and that their initial suspicion was warranted. The audience has, in effect, seen the event for themselves; but *only* by seeing the undoing of that event in terms of its sub-medial conditions. At this moment, when these two deaths exist within the same medial space, the laying bare of a cover up assures a sincerity to the event that it would not otherwise exhibit. It gives the two deaths one life, rooted in the trust that *some* event had happened; establishing the trust needed to move forward and explore *what kind* of event it, in fact, was. It also provides a specific sincerity to the event which *allows* the audience to move onwards into the arrangement of signs and figures, books, films, conspiracy theories, and so on. For, as Groys notes:

suspicion supports all values medially, because submedial space (the submedial carrier) is nothing but the space of suspicion. [...] However, in order to be truly compelling, values must repeatedly renew the *mana* of medial sincerity. That is, they must repeatedly confirm the suspicion that submedial space “essentially” looks different on its inside than it appears to be on the medial surface. (2012, pp.175-6, emphasis original)

In Groys’ view, such ‘*mana*’ – the ‘aura of medial truth’ (p.141) – is renewed by the act of critique: after all, the attempt to expose or reveal what is hidden within a sign is also a demonstration that something exists behind it. Critique is thus embedded within a cultural

economy which involves not only the exchange of the surface of a sign for a hidden sub-medial ‘reality’, but the generation of a value in the original object of critique: as Groys notes, ‘the more a sign is deconstructed, exposed, stripped of its aura, and devalued, the more *mana* and medial power it absorbs.’ (p.165) What is apparent, though, is that the two deaths of Bin Laden present something distinctive from this general economy. It is the doubling of the event – the anaphoric repetition, rather than the economic supplementing or substituting – which lends it sincerity; and the manner in which this doubling confirms the suspicion of submedial space is precisely what makes it a ‘demonic’ event.

4 Repetition, Again

This point echoes, to an extent, the concerns of Rita Felski when she writes of how the notion of ‘critique’ has become synonymous with an attitude of suspicion (2016, p.6), which may not map on to a single methodological hermeneutics, but nevertheless constitutes a particular mood or mind-set that characterises critical thinking. But in this case, I am more interested in how the demonic frames the doubling of the demonised Bin Laden figure. For this, it is useful to sketch out in three brief points how this scene links to a particular *topic* of demonological rhetoric, which concerns precisely the relationship between the sincerity of the authentic, and the demonic as a form of repetition.

The first point to note is that demonic repetition does not necessarily *negate* the singularity of sincerity, so much as *undermine* it; precisely by performing an uncanny reproduction of sincerity’s conditions. Klossowski demonstrates this with his reading of Tertullian’s *On the Soul*: here, the demon is cast as a simulator, not of Christ (as with St. Paul’s Anti-Christ), but of the dead: demons allow the dead to walk, which in turn discredits the significance of Christ’s resurrection. Klossowski notes that, on the one hand, this

correspondence of existence and simulation translates into the dichotomy of God as being, the demon as non-being (2007, p.18). On the other hand, the simulation is not simply inauthentic, but rather undermines the very facticity of the authentic. This is an ironic phenomenon, because, at least in the religious sense, the authenticity of the event in question – Christ's resurrection – is rooted in its utter singularity. The power of the demonic is not simply the opposite of the power of God; but the gnawing doubt, the risk of error that accompanies such a repetition. Indeed, as a 'perversion of the creative', in Tillich's words (1936, p.93), the demonic troubles and subverts our very confidence in both our capacity to represent the *difference* which marks out the demon from ourselves, and to critique it.

The second point to note is that while we can detect this demonic repetition, and its relation to sincerity and error, throughout the history of the demonic, it also undergoes a metamorphosis related to both the nature of 'the authentic' and the medium of repetition. As Leatherbarrow (2004) argues, the increasingly 'secular' conditions of 19th century culture led to representations of demons reflecting an internal human condition, rather than external spirit; but rather than this internalising resting easy in figures of psychosis or mania, it also coincides with the the communicative institutions of a growing media culture (see Kittler 1992). Thus, we find across literature endless examples of the demonic which call into question the creative-destructive dialectic of repetition: Dostoevsky's *doppelgänger* and Shelley's replicant are also not simply 'monsters', but ambiguous reiterations of social bureaucracy and scientific ambition. In such examples, the threat is not simply to the clearly identifiable authentic human existence. The demonic is not simply a version of Benjamin's mechanical reproduction; nor what Michel de Certeau describes as 'the confrontation [...] of a society with the certainties it is losing and those it is attempting to acquire.' (1996, p.2) Rather, the threat is to the sincerity with which we can trust the medial carriers of this existence, which in turn allow us to articulate this difference between 'life' and uncanny

replica. The demonic remains a faulty replica, within a culture increasingly dependent upon hidden, sub-medial processes of technological replication. The logic of demonic repetition remains, but the shift in its medium of expression reveals a reflexive concern with medium itself. In Joanna Hodge's words:

the figure of the demon shows that technology does not reveal a termination of history but the vanishing of the nineteenth-century dream that history might be thought of as some single structure, through which a discrete process, the emancipation of human beings, might be thought to take place. (Hodge 2000, p.37)

The third point to note is that this vanishing is not delivered via pure negation. Rather, the demonic emerges through uncanny and un-authored creations of such an historical narrative as it is performed and expressed: creations which, in turn, render the narrative suspect. We need only think of Nietzsche's reimagining of Descartes' demonic doubt: while Descartes' demon is summoned in the *Meditations* to challenge the certainty of our self-knowledge – which, as Christia Mercer (2016) has reminded us, itself replicates a well-established tradition of early modern meditative practice – the demon of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* challenges, not certainty, but rather the exclusivity, individuality and significance of our self-knowledge. No longer simulating existence and being, the modern demon confronts humanity with fleeting images of its own inversion: images that undermine the human being as a singular and irreplaceable being. Perhaps the exemplar of such a performance is the work of Kierkegaard, which continuously wrestles with this problem in its efforts to describe the full problem of the demonic within the context of the growing print culture of 19th century Europe, and the distinctive interpretative audience this creates. The demon is, for

Kierkegaard, the faulty replica of the believer, possessing all the strengths and creative potentiality of religious commitment, but turned inward towards nihilism. But even in describing this, Kierkegaard struggles to position the demonic amongst a typology of signs; the act of writing, printing and circulating his work *itself* continuously undoes the efforts to capture the demonic adequately (see Grimwood 2013). This is encapsulated in Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*, where demonic despair is described as if:

an author were to make a slip of the pen, and that this clerical error became conscious of being such – perhaps it was no error but in a far higher sense was an essential constituent in the whole exposition – it is then as if this clerical error would revolt against the author, out of hatred for him were to forbid him to correct it, and were to say, “No, I will not be erased, I will stand as a witness against thee, that thou art a very poor writer.” (Kierkegaard 2013, p.370)

Such a slip of the pen invokes the modes of simulation and repetition: both in terms of the demonic as a kind of ‘fake’ religious existence; a relationship to infinity that is entirely bound up in oneself, rather than in God; as well as in the simulation of writing itself, as a technique of iteration.

This point leads us back to our starting point: for, in many ways, this is no different from Lanz's problem of gossip. It is not that gossip completely withdraws from any narrative economy of signs, but rather circulates an uncomfortable *excess* of signs; the mundanity of which are always slightly beyond the grasp of definitive concepts. For this very reason, they hold a certain demonic threat: we lose sight of being able to tell the sub-medial from the medial, and invest in a sincerity based on an endless interplay of surfaces. In Tillich's words: the ‘depth of the demonic is just this, that the meaningful and meaningless elements in it are

inseparably combined. Thereupon rests its inevitability, its surpassing power, in the face of which all moralising is doomed to impotence.’ (Tillich 1936, p.120)

Bin Laden’s death continues this demonic motif, in the sense that its double announcement creates an event explicitly through the circulation and repetition of information. Sincerity, in this case, is produced not simply by locating a source of ‘truth’ – such as a proper reference, or an absolute relation to the event that we observe – but rather through the awareness of where we, as interpreters, stand in relation to repetition, or, more specifically, its inherent errors. As such, the repetition of an event identifies and validates its original on the one hand; and on the other hand, *by virtue* of this possibility of repetition, the very vulnerability of that truth is exposed. In this way, the demonic emerges in the technologies of repetition that threaten to create a ‘life’ which challenges our ability to mark a difference between authentic life, and replicated life beyond agency or control (a blurring line which Derrida, in his reading of de Man reading Rousseau, specifically cites as a ‘monstrosity’ (2002, pp.72-4; see Grimwood 2013, pp.916-7)). This inherent medial aspect of the demonic carries its capacity to reproduce and perpetuate itself; in short, to impersonate the creative without an act of creation.

In turn, it is precisely the development of medial technologies which amplify Lanz’s original concern with gossip into the contemporary configuration of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ we have today. It is our contemporary medial forms, after all, which enable repetition to become so central to our moral and political narratives. As such, the sincerity of Bin Laden’s death is not achieved through the production of the event, but rather through the expectations of its circulation: specifically, expectations of error and counter-narrative which are nothing other than the heightened economy of suspicion which drives, in Groys words, the ‘medium of media.’ In this sense, the fleeting scene of Bin Laden’s two deaths passes quickly precisely because it is embedded within particular techniques of iteration that are otherwise completely

banal. But demonic creativity has always concealed itself with the banality of repetition: this is precisely how it undermines the sacred. And on this note, the scene of Bin Laden's death raises a further question about the meaning of the demonic in contemporary culture, removed from (though related to) the more traditional foci of the problem of evil or the fear of the Other. That question is how these technologies of repetition, embedded within the banal repetition of our everyday practices, might not only sustain a paradoxical 'life that is opposed to life' (Ferne 2013: 22), but also sustain an equally paradoxical death: or at least, blur the difference between authentic and replicated death for the sake of medial sincerity. This is precisely why we must heed Tillich's argument that demonic sincerity is fundamentally creative. While the appearance of the demonic has always, historically, been characterised by repetition and mutation, it remains too easy to lose the creative value of these paradoxes once the demonic is 'explained' as a mere devil, monster or obscene Other. At that point, the demonic is reduced to its destructive role, and the clichés return – not simply clichés of evil, but also un-reflexive clichés of criticism. And this, of course, affects the afterlife of a death: it directs the focus and flow of how such a death is preserved; and, of course, how our discussions of morality, politics and critique proceed around it.

5 Demonic Clichés

To illustrate this last point around the afterlife of demonic sincerity, consider a different scene, which, while very different in content to Bin Laden's death/s, seems to also capture the 'perversion of creativity' which Tillich identified in the demonic today. In 'White Bear', an episode of Charlie Brooker's television drama series *Black Mirror*, a girl, Victoria, wakes up with complete amnesia in an empty house in an abandoned village. Exploring her surroundings, Victoria is soon pursued by a slow-moving, zombie-esque crowd who silently

film her on their mobile phones. In fear, she is taken into some woods by a mysterious saviour, who then attempts to viciously torture her; as she calls for help, a mute audience gathers, continuously playing the scene on their mobile devices. But before long, the reveal is made: the set is pulled away, and we see that Victoria has unwittingly been caught in real-world play. The mobile phone carriers are a paying audience, and the characters she has met only actors. Strapped to a chair, the narrative is resolved: Victoria is not a victim, but in fact a perpetrator; years ago, she participated with her fiancé in the abduction and murder of a child, which she filmed on their mobile phone. Having pleaded guilty, but claiming to be ‘under the spell’ of her fiancé, her punishment is confinement in a lurid theme park named the White Bear Justice Park, where each day members of the public can pay to enact a curious mob justice: she is forced to undergo the same experience of terror which the victim felt, and in this way is exposed to her crime (and punishment) in front of a baying studio audience. She is then drugged, and awakes the next day with no memory; caught in a constant loop of re-discovering her crimes.

Characteristically for *Black Mirror*, ‘White Bear’ plays on the audience’s expectations through the archetypal arrangement of hero and victim in zombie movies, switching one demon (zombie-turned-audience) with another (hero-turned-child-killing-voyeur), in order to open an implicit question over the morality of the distant, disinterested spectators who thirst for the visceral and immanent punishment of unthinkable crimes (audience-turned-zombie again, perhaps). In doing so, it reminds us that the recent cultural resurgence of zombies is only ever nostalgic. The zombie may be undead, but such a traversing of life and death is far from a *demonic* monstrosity: after all, in archetypal series such as *The Walking Dead*, the eponymous undead are still markedly *different* from those who are alive; the fear they elicit is blunt horror, rather than uncanny. In contrast, ‘White Bear’ reminds us that the creative aspect of the demonic, as a medial form, fundamentally

problematizes such distinctions. Indeed, the central demonic aspect of the episode is the constant repetition of the action by the ever-present ‘screening’ of mobile devices.

The very moment at which this uncanny repetition is removed – the moment when the twist is explained by an announcer on a stage, at which point the ambiguous juxtaposition gives way to a moralising narrative – this demonic aspect subsides, and is replaced with a folk devil (Victoria herself). It is not insignificant that the ‘reveal’ of the episode is purposefully weak – performed with the camera uncomfortably close-up to the announcer, straining to express the moral disdain at the protagonist’s past actions. The single statement of sincerity – *this is what you have been watching, all along!* – is rendered feeble by its removal and obscuring of the different medial surfaces it rests on. That is to say: on the one hand, we are being shown everything there is to see regarding the plot narrative; but on the other hand, the power of the narrative was our suspicion that there must *always be more*.

The use of repetition in ‘White Bear’ – of images, of names, and of genre tropes – is central to the sense it creates: to such an extent that, once a narrative resolution emerges, it can only ever be weak. We are once again reminded that the singularity of the event is not enough, if it is to be sincere; and, as in the case of Bin Laden’s death, the repetition of the event reveals a sincerity which can only every be paradoxical.

The problem of this narrative resolution returns us to an earlier point: that the demonic has always, historically, only made sense in the context of its overcoming by an ultimate good; but that – as ‘White Bear’ reminds us – the nature of such an ultimate good has become complex, often sustained by acts of clichéd repetition. In his detailed account of the ‘narrative turn’ in Western politics, Christian Salmon provides a powerful insight into how policy decisions are replicated – and then replaced – through the perpetual repetition of the ‘enigmatic signs’ of storytelling in order to project an authenticity to a disillusioned

voting public. But this turn, Salmon argues, is prompted by a specific problem facing political speech-writers and spin doctors regarding the everyday, aimless circulation of something which Lanz might recognise as gossip: ‘How can we control the explosion of discursive practices on the Internet? How can we communicate in this chaos of fragmented knowledge without the help of some shared legitimizing figure?’ And, in turn, ‘How are we to describe the conflicts of interest, the ideological or religious collisions, or the culture wars?’ (2010, p.94) This is why, Salmon argues, ‘storytelling has become the “magic” formula that can inspire trust and even belief in voter-subjects.’ (p.95) In this sense, the coherence of political storytelling – which would include the conspiracy theories which by now envelop Bin Laden’s two deaths, in the way that they clumsily force the visual *mythos* of the Bin Laden trope into a scientific causal logic – create trust *only* by building on a prior sense of sincerity which is already embedded within ‘the flow’ (Groys 2016) of that which it attempts to control. Necessarily, this narrative resolution is weak, simplistic or overly-clear for the complexity of the depth of rhetorical signifiers it draws on.

But likewise, it is not enough to simply critique this narrative turn for what Salmon’s book describes as the ‘bewitching of the modern mind.’ This only serves to obscure the question of how the critic themselves accesses such narratives, yet remains *un-bewitched*; or what happens to the circulation of bewitchment once it is exposed. And in many ways, such an obscurity – an obscurity which is paradoxically produced from the very act of critical clarification – serves as a contemporary form of demonic temptation. After all, it is tempting to apply a heavy-handed coherence to the scene of Bin Laden’s death – to insist on one death, not two – but in doing so, this effectively enacts the same rhetoric of control which Salmon criticises. It insists on one narrative over another, without probing the conditions by which we trust in either.⁶ It is tempting, likewise, to figure the rhetoric of demonology as separate from its sub-medial structure – that is, to relegate it to a sign of ‘evil’ or ‘ignorance’ – when, in

fact, the medium of communication is precisely where the creative terror of the demonic resides. It is tempting to place it, as Salmon does, within a 'fiction economy' (Salmon 2010, p.53) that is based on nothing more than the production of storytelling, rather than the circulation and preservation of such narratives which are embroiled within the cultural discernment of the medial from the sub-medial. And of course, it is true that in both 'White Bear', as much as in Bin Laden's demise, there is a question of 'what *actually* happened?', which demands an answer beyond the ornaments of anaphora. Of course, there are ethical and political questions which follow from the 'facts' of the answer to that question. But underlying these are fundamental – albeit fleeting – questions of medial sincerity which the demonic has always played upon and subverted, creatively and destructively. Hence, it is more telling to attempt to situate the ways in which the demonic maintains, in uncanny ways, the same tropes of moral, critical and spiritual teleology which would seem otherwise opposed to it.

As such, to interrogate the demonic today is to not simply observe terrifying and monstrous repetition, but also to interrogate the cheerless banality of the clichés which prompts and creates the conditions for the kind of radical othering within contemporary demonization. These momentary, banal emergences of the demonic are precisely what signal a form of creativity which links its contemporary appearances to a long, well-embedded history within Western culture; a history which goes well beyond signs of demons alone.

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¹ As De Certeau introduces his masterful reading of the 17th century *Possession at Loudun*, a 'diabolical crisis' 'is not merely an object of historical curiosity. It is the confrontation [...] of

a society with the certainties it is losing and those it is attempting to acquire.’ (Certeau 1996, p.2)

² For example, Thacker’s work draws upon the styles of medieval *quaestio*, meditation, and short, partially connected interventions across historical periods; Vilém Flusser’s work on *The History of the Devil* does not present a linear argument but a ‘spiral’, structured ‘according to the way the devil exercises his influence upon men’ (Osthoff 2009, p.66) via uncanny repetition.

³ See, for example, Stelter (2011); Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson’s tweet remains viewable at <https://twitter.com/TheRock/status/64877987341938688>

⁴ While Tillich still insisted that the demonic only made sense in the context of the ultimate goodness of the divine, and that such dialectic ‘breaks down only before divinity, the possessed state before the state of grace, the destructive before redeeming fate’ (1936, p.122), this, he concluded, was an event for eternity. In our own time, the demonic finds a reality in the capitalist free market, and the ‘last great demonry of the present’, nationalism – and there is, he suggested, no adequate response to this.

⁵ It is important to note that Groys’ account of the sub-medial, whilst part of a phenomenology of media, should not be confused with the Husserlian distinction between part and whole (see Abram 1996): that is, I see a bowl, but only one side of it; in turning it around, I see the other side, but not the first. Groys’ concern is distinctly medial, rather than epistemological.

⁶ In this sense, the aftermath of Bin Laden’s death stands as a key illustration of Latour’s provocative charge that cultural critique and conspiracy theory are not so far apart: ‘conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless.’ (2004, p.230)